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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the ideas of William James and John Dewey to buttresses an opposition to any effort to amend the United States Constitution to encourage or compel elementary and secondary school students to recite daily an oral prayer. The first section is a selection of the views of Dewey and James. The second section utilizes these ideas to respond to five questions: (1) Could we not experiment with different kinds of prayers, or perhaps alternate the prayers of one group with another?; (2) Couldn't a teacher who wishes to model good behavior before his or her students demonstrate this by leading a class in prayer?; (3) Isn't there a prayer that would please most people, like the Lord's Prayer?; (4) What is wrong with letting local and state authorities make the decision about how to handle the school prayer question?; and (5) Isn't the religious liberty of those who want to pray in the public schools being violated today? The paper emphatically responds in the negative to questions 1-3 and 5. Allowing state and local authorities to make decisions regarding school prayer issues (question 4) is rejected because the Bill of Rights applies to all states. To argue otherwise is to misunderstand the fundamental character of the U.S. federal system. Contains 13 notes. (LH)

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LIKELY IMPLICATIONS OF THE THOUGHT OF DEWEY AND JAMES REGARDING A SCHOOL PRAYER AMENDMENT

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LIKELY IMPLICATIONS OF THE THOUGHT OF DEWEY AND JAMES REGARDING A SCHOOL PRAYER AMENDMENT

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April 22, 1995

". . . the future of the religious function seems preeminently bound up with its emancipation from religions and a particular religion."

John Dewey (1934 a)

". . . the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature, together with the idea of peculiar avenues of access to such truths."

John Dewey (1934 b)

" 'The religion of humanity' affords a basis for ethics as well as theism does."

William James (a)

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; . . . ."

First Amendment

"Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers, and our country."

New York State Board of Regemts

"The place of religion in our society is an exalted one, achieved through a long tradition of reliance on the home, the church and the inviolable citadel of the individual heart and mind. We have come to recognize through bitter experience that it is not within the power of government to invade that citadel, whether its purpose or effect be to aid or oppose, to advance or retard, the relationship between man and religion, the state is firmly committed to a position of neutrality."

Tom Clark, Justice
U. S. Supreme Court

"Protecting religious freedoms may be more important in the late 20th century than it was when the Bill of Rights was ratified."

Sandra Day O'Connor, Justice
U. S. Supreme Court

The appropriate place of religion in America's public schools has long been a difficult issue. With the emergence of our system of public schooling in the 19th century, questions arose about the place of religious values and convictions in these common schools that were organized to welcome children of all faiths. These questions led to severe conflicts in many communities. For instance, in Philadelphia full-scale riots and bloodshed erupted in the 1840s over which version of the bible should be used in classroom devotions. Cincinnati was sharply divided by the "Bible War" in the 1870s. Many Americans gradually came to realize that interfaith harrmony and community goodwill could best be realized by keeping public schools neutral on religious questions.

The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the wisdom of this realization in 1962 when it ruled that government-mandated prayer, Bible-reading and other religous exercises are inappropriate in our public schools. The justices claimed that the church-state separation implications of the 'establishment' and 'free exercise' clauses of the first amendment forbade such government meddling in the realm of religious worship. Despite this decision, however, many people in our country, including powerful political leaders, either misunderstand or, worse, deliberately distorted the scope, meaning and intentions of this decision.

This became abundantly clear during the weeks immediately following the sweeping Republican victory on November 8, 1994, when one of the most prominent topics of discussion among the Republican leadership was the need to construct and adopt an amendment to the U.S. Constitution which would strongly encourage, if not compel, students in our nation's public elementary and secondary schools daily to recite an oral prayer.

Two enduringly prominent American philosophers, John Dewey and William James, had much to say about the notion of religion and prayer.

The purposes of this paper are (a) to become aware of the religious perspectives which emerge from selected ideas derived from the thought of each of these thinkers, and (b) to use these perspectives as the basis for responding to five questions which reveal the likely consequences for our American culture if a school prayer amendment were proposed by our Congress and approved by thirty-eight or more states.

I shall pursue purpose 'a' by employing a number of categories which have a bearing on their perspectives about religion. Within each category will be found one or several passages from their publications.

Two matters need to be clear at the outset. One, the writer has a deep commitment to the belief that the principle of church-state separation which has been a powerful barrier to those who would impose their theological dogmas on others must be, as much as possible, sustained in our country. Second, it should be clear at the outset that in a paper of this length it is possible to use only a few of the significant ideas which were expressed by Dewey and James which have ramifications for religion and for a prayer amendment.

JOHN DEWEY

Pragmatism

"Pragmatism," as Dewey perceived the meaning which Mr. James gave it "is a temper of mind, an attitude; it is also", in Dewey's eyes "a theory of the nature of ideas and truth and finally, it is a theory about reality." (Dewey, N.C., 303).

As he understood it, Dewey proclaimed that "Pragmatism thus has a metaphysical implication. The doctrine of the value of consequences," he claimed, "leads us to take the future into consideration. And this taking into consideration of the future takes us to the conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished, of a universe which is still, in James' term, 'in the making,' 'in the process of becoming,' of a universe up to a

certain point still plastic." (Dewey, 1931, 25).

RELIGION VERSUS RELIGIOUS

Dewey consistently differentiated between the noun 'religion' and the adjective 'religious'. Religion, he claimed, ". . . always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight." (Dewey, 1934a, 9-10).

Religious, on the other hand, ". . . denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church." (Dewey, 1934a, 9-10).

Consistently arguing that institutionalized religion was something more than a personal emotion, he claimed that "to say it [religion] is institutionalized is to say that it involves a tough body of customs, ingrained habits of action, organized and authorized standards and methods of procedure." (Dewey, 1929, 799).

Dewey also claimed that "never before in history has mankind been so much of two minds, so divided into two camps, as it is today. Religions have traditionally," he argued, "been allied with ideas of the supernatural, and often been based upon explicit beliefs about it." Continuing, he claimed that "today there are many who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural . . . . " "The opposed group," he pointed out, "consists of those who think the advance of culture and science has completely discredited the supernatural and with it all religions that were allied with belief in it." (Dewey, 1934a, I).

". . . religious qualities and values if they are real at all," Dewey went on, are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism; . . . . " Indeed," he went on, "under existing condtions, the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths

that are religious by their own nature, together with the idea of peculiar avenues of access to such truths." (Dewey, 1934a, 32-33).

Science

Dewey possessed a passionate belief in reflective thought, his conception of the method of science, and he perceived the profound impact that this method was having on our lives. He also recognized that "the fundamentalist in religion [was] one whose beliefs in intellectual content have hardly been touched by scientific developments. His notions about heaven and earth and man, as far as their bearing on religion is concerned," he vigorously argued, "are hardly more affected by the work of Copernicus, Newton, and Darwin than they are by that of Einstein. However, he consistently pointed out, "the context of his actual life, in what he does day by day, and in the contacts that are set up, has been radically changed by political and economic changes that have followed from the applications of science." (Dewey, 1934a, 63).

Natural Religion

Dewey was further convinced that if "the naturalistic foundations and bearings of religions [were] grasped, the religious element in life would emerge from the throes of the crisis in religion." Moreover, "religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization. All that is significant in human experience," he consistently claimed, "falls within this frame." (Dewey, 1934a, 57).

Indeed, ". . . natural religion," he asserted, "no more denied the intellectual validity of supernatural ideas than did the growth of independent congregations. It attempted rather to justify theism and immortality on the basis of the natural reason of the individual." (Dewey, 1934a, 64).

Epistemology

Dewey claimed that ". . . the characteristic of religion," from the point of view of dogmatic, institutionalized religion, "is that it is - intellectually - a secret, not public; peculiarly revealed, not generally known; authoritatively declared, not communicated and tested in ordinary ways." Deeply concerned about the contradictions in learning which this characteristic of religion possessed, he consistently asked, "What is to be done about this increasing antinomy between the standard for coming to know in other subjects of the school, and coming to know in religious matters?" For ". . . as long as religion is conceived as it now is conceived by the great majority of professed religionists, there is something self-contradictory in speaking of education in religion in the same sense in which we speak of education in topics where the method of free inquiry has made its way." (Dewey, 1940, 82).

WILLIAM JAMES

Pragmatism

Pragmatism, James used to argue, is a new way to handle old ways of thought. Pragmatism is what James would call a mediator, a reconciler, a method of thinking which 'unstiffens' our theories. "In other words, there can be no final truth in ethics," according to James, "any more than in physics, until the last man has had his experience and said his say." Indeed, he went on," . . . in the religious field she [pragmatism] is at a great advantage both over positivistic empiricism, with its anti-theological bias, and over religious rationalism, with its exclusive interest in the remote, the nobel, the simple and tha abstract. . . ." (James, in Stuhr, 143).

Pragmatism and God

Pragmatism also, in James' perspective, "widens the field of search

for God. Rationalism sticks to logic and the empyrean. Empiricism sticks to the external senses. Pragmatism is willing to take anything, to follow either logic or the senses, and to count," in his view, "the humblest and most personal experiences." Pragmatism, James claims, ". . . will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact - if that should seem a likely place to find him." (James, in Stuhr, 143).

Epistemology of Pragmatism

Pragmatism's "only test of probable truth," asserts James, "is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of the life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands. . . . If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, . . . should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence? She could see no meaning in treating as 'not true' a notion that was pragmatically so successful. What other kind of truth," James proclaims, "could there be for her [pragmatism] than all this agreement with concrete reality?" (James, in Stuhr, 143).

Ethics and Truth

James claimed that ". . . there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help," he asserted, "to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contributed to the race's moral life." (James, in Stuhr, 143).

Belief

James was particularly adept at constructing stories to make a point. In one case he explains the notion of 'belief' by asking us to "let us give the name of 'hypothesis' to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either 'live or dead.' A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him whom it is proposed . . . deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the

individual thinker. They are measured," according to James, "by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically," he argues, "that means belief; . . . ." (James, in Stuhr, 166-167).

Respect for many creeds

Perry points out that "it is difficult to distinguish between James's own personal faith and those faiths of others which he not only tolerated and respected, but understood with so much sympathy that he felt their echo in his own breast. Furthermore, Perry observes, "it was a part of his creed that there should be many gospels, and it is not easy to tell when he was illustrating this general principle and when he was expounding that particular gospel by which *he* was saved. In a sense his whole genius," Perry goes on, 'lay in multiplying differences and alternatives, and in justifying each idiosyncrasy in its own terms." (Perry, 264).

The bible

Asked whether the bible was authoritative, James replied "No, no, no. It is so human a book that I don't see how belief in its divine authorship can survive the reading of it." (Perry, 269-270).

Church vs. nature

"The spirit of the two systems [nature and church], James argued, "is so utterly diverse that to an imagination nurtured on the one it is hardly conceivable that the other should yield sustenance . . . ." Continuing in the same vein he confessed to his own inner dispositions with the assertion that "I must personally confess that my own training in natural sciences has completely disqualified me for sympathetic treatment of the ecclesiastic univers . . . . It is," he admitted, "impossible to believe that the same God who established nature should also feel a special pride at being more immediately represented by clergymen than by laymen, or find a sweet sound in church-phraseology and intonation, or a sweet savor in

the distinction between deacons, archdeacons and bishops. He is not," James opined, "of that prim temper." (James, 1902, 1906, 214).

James's religion

James's religion, according to Perry, "took the form neither of dogma nor of institutional allegiance. He was essentially a man of faith, though not a man for any one church or creed against the rest. Unlike his father, he was not interested in elaboration and specific formulation even of his own personal beliefs. He confined himself to the intellectual acceptance of what he regards as the substance of all religions. He insisted," Perry claims, " upon retaining not only the ideality but also the *actuality* of God - as a conscious power beyond, with which one may come into beneficient contact; he believed in the triumph, through this same power, of the cause of righteousness to which his moral will was pledged; and he entertained a hopeful half-belief in personal immortality. These specific doctrinal affirmations, together with his belief in believing, his sympathy with every personal belief which brought to an individual the consolation or the incentive that he needed, and the quality of tenderness and general good will which pervade all of his relations with his fellow men, make up the substance," believes Perry, "of his personal religion." (Perry, 270).

Two forms of faith

". . . the ideas which are developed in the *Varieties* represent one of two threads which can be traced back continuously to his youth. There were always two kinds of faith, the fighting faith and the comforting faith; or, as they might be called the faith upstream and the faith downstream. The former is the faith," James believed, "that springs from strength. Preferring the good to the evil, the moral person fights for it with the sort of confidence that the brave man feels in himself and his allies, exulting in the danger and in the uncertainty of the issue. This is

the faith of James's growth-mindedness, ... The second is the faith that springs from human weakness, and asks for refuge and security. In the fighting faith religion is a stimulant to the will; the comforting faith, on the other hand, is at the bottom of one's heart, relaxing. Though one may grow with great earnestness, one is aware [in this comforting faith of being carried to port - safely, inexorably - by the very current in which one floats." (Perry, 253-254).

James's meaning of religion

Perry points out that "while James identified religion with certain specific experiences, and with specific facts, events, forces, and entities which these experiences revealed, he did not identify religion with any particular creed. By religion he means historic religions, but in respect of their common content and not their particular dogmas." (Perry, 257).

LIKELY IMPLICATIONS

I shall pursue purpose 'b' by using the ideas in these categories to suggest the likely implications, the likely consequences, for our culture, which the adoption of a school prayer amendment portend. To begin with, when the Republican leadership announced following the November, 1994, elections that they would commit themselves to the development and passage of a constitutional amendment "to restore the right to pray" in our public schools, they returned to a commitment that President Ronald Reagan announced on May 6, 1982, thereby reopening a thirty-four-year old controversy.

The likely implications of a school prayer amendment for religous liberty, interfaith harmony and the integrity of public schools, as we will see, which emerge from the categories of thought which we have constructed are many and varied. Let us approach these implications by constructing responses to five significant questions.

1. Could we not experiment with different kinds of prayers, or, perhaps, alternate the prayers of one group with another?

Clearly both the views of James and Dewey regarding pragmatism suggest that a positive response to this question would lead to serious consequences. The Encyclopedia of American Religion, for instance, tells us that there are about 2,000 different religious groups in the United States. How could we possibly find time to accommodate them all? While the thought of attempting to do this would certainly reveal an 'unstiffening' of our nation's principle of separation of church and state, it would lead to unconscionable, administratively unworkable, absurd administrative dilemmas. Further, it would mix institutionalize religion, as Dewey points out, with personal views, something which would further exacerbate the division of our citizens into what James would argue are two competing systems, two competing camps. Surely many people do not want their children to recite the prayers of religions with which they do not subscribe.

2. Couldn't a teacher who wishes to model good behavior before his or her students demonstrate this by leading a class in prayer?

Here, again, we see the impact of the lack of understanding and appreciation of both Dewey's notions of 'religion' and 'religious', and James's notions relative to the institutionalized church and nature. Both thinkers perceive the values to be derived from recognizing the natural content of the religious elements in human living and the need for those engaged in public school teaching to exemplify such powerful spiritual values as brotherhood and sisterhood, integrity, love, truth, honesty, friendship, respect, responsibility, along with a passionate commitment to academic and moral excellence as being *naturally* 'religious' rather than thinking of them as being derived only from orally reciting a prayer about a connection with some transcendental deity. It would surely be

wrong, if James is at all correct, to imply, as such a prayer would certainly do, that there is but one gospel, but one way to achieve salvation.

Further, it would be simply unfair to expect a teacher to lead a religious exercise or devoiton which is, as James would say, a 'dead hypothesis', one which the teacher may not accept at all. Even if the teacher were to be excused because of the lack of liveness of the hypothesis, even if a student were, for instance, to be asked to lead a prayer, there is the large likelihood that divisiveness would emerge among the students, to say nothing of their parents. Again, as James points out, we need to respect many gospels, particularly in the diverse society which constitutes the United States. Puble school classrooms, to consider the the pragmatic view of Dewey, could easily turn into battlegrounds as religious groups would vie for control.

The best way for a teacher to model excellent behavior would be by treating all religious beliefs with fairness, by avoiding the acceptance of either a 'dead' or a 'live' hypothesis, again to use the words of James.

3. Isn't there a prayer that would please most people, like the Lord's Prayer?

James speaks to this matter forcefully with his view of the Bible. Clearly the bible is not authoritative in the absolute sense, any more than a particular prayer, be it the Lord's Prayer, or any of a number of alternative prayers, would be. Choosing to recite this prayer or any other prayer would constitute tyranny of consience for many individuals. Indeed, Dewey would point out that the probability would be that the only kind of prayer that might please all of our religious traditions would be likely to be so watered down and vague that it would be insulting to most sincere members of any religion. Far better, he would argue, that we point out the gneric existence of *natural* religious values in every asspect of human

experience, particularly such liberating habits of mind that compel us to search for possibilities, both in terms of ends-in-view and in terms of means, a habit of mind which can only enlarge our range of thinking about how to shape the future in increasingy rich and humanly desireable ways. James would concur with his stress on the need to multiply our differences, on the need to acquire a sympathy in our breast for *all* ways of perceiving religious values.

Further, we should stress the fact that a prayer such as the Lord's Prayer is a prayer from the Christian tradition. It would surely not be acceptable to Jews, Moslems, Hindus, atheists, and other non-Christian faiths. In addition, there are Protestant and Catholic versions of the Lord's Prayer. While this might be appealing to some, to many others such an 'unstiffening', to employ James' idea, of our traditional desire to remain neutral relative to religious values, to sustain the wall of separation between the chruch and the state which has served our country so well, would surely lead to the vexatious problem of deciding which version to handle; and who would make this decision? From the view of science and its reflective component, as Dewey employs it, what type of 'not yet', of end-in-view, of future, do we wish to construct for our nation? Clearly the likely consequences of an arbitrary choice of a prayer to be said orally would lead to sharp conflicts among students and their parents. It would be best to recognize, as James so presciently points out, the need to respect the individuality of students, teachers, and parents, to recognize that the religion one accepts needs to be one that each person finds best for that person; clearly the imposition of single prayers on all people in our schools would demolish this personal right and be a egregious mistake.

4. What is wrong with letting local and state authorities make the decision about how to handle the school prayer question?

We should never lose sight of the fact the the Bill of Rights applies to all states, to all people in our country. Basic civil liberties, including religion, including the right to believe and practice one's beliefs in terms of one' own personal conscience, are not subject to the limitations of our state borders. To suggest this is to misunderstand the nature of our federal political system. Diversity of religious belief, respect for creeds, is not limited to particular geographic locations. Indeed, this may be one of the most disturbing aspects of the proposed amendment which has emanated since the fall, 1994, elections.

Consider the possibility that such an amendment, if adopted, would include language which would make it posssible for states and localities to develop their own voluntary prayer, to be free to choose their own ways of worshipping a deity. Clearly someone, some group, would have to have the power to determine the content of such prayers. Just as certainly, such prayers would not constitute 'live' hypotheses for many in the state or particular locality. How oppressive such prayers would be for those attending or working in our public schools!

5. Isn't the religious liberty of those who what to pray in our public schools being violated today?

Absolutely not! Indeed, just the contrary is the case. Students, teachers, others in the public school, can reflect on a deity if they so choose *at any time* during the school day. It is not hyperbole to make the claim that many students and teachers in our public schools not infrequently engage in such practices during every school day. But they do it privately, silently, in their own way, within their own private consciousnesses. This is the way it ought to be. We ought not try, as James points out, to identify religion with any particular persuasion, we ought not try to inculcatre any particular dogmas in our public schools. Rather we need to sustain that form of what James calls a 'fighting faith'

a faith which enables us to fight against those who would tear down the wall of separation between church and state which has been, arguably, the most significant contribution that our country has made to the political and social evolution of humankind.

SUMMARY

In this exploratory paper I have made an effort to identify a number of the ideas generated by William James and John Dewey which have implications for our society in terms of any effort which may be made by the leaders of our nation to adopt a school prayer amendment which would affect our public schools. It should be kept in mind that these ideas represent only a sampling of the perspectives which these philosophers developed relative to this matter. These perspectives were then drawn upon to develop responses to five significant questions whichwere designed to reveal the likely implications of the thinking of these two philosophers relative to the problematic with which this paper is concerned.

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